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Mental Health and Aging

Kathy Bosch

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Mental Health and Aging

By Kathy Bosch, Extension Specialist, Family Life Education

Mentally healthy people have the ability to respond to others, to love and be loved, and to cope with others in give-and-take relationships.

There are many changes associated with aging such as health, work and social roles, including relationships with family and friends. Some changes are welcomed, some endured and others difficult to accept. Stress often accompanies change, but too much stress can upset mental health. Other factors that can cause or contribute to mental health challenges include poor nutrition, physical health problems, alcohol consumption, prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, lack of exercise, persistent or extreme stress, or the lack of ability to deal with stress in general.

The American Psychiatric Association has identified more than 200 mental disorders that may leave a person feeling distressed and often unable to go about normal, daily activities. People with a mental disorder are at an increased risk of suffering, being disabled, and dying. Getting proper mental health care can improve and extend life.

Mental health treatment can be extremely effective with older adults. For example, over 90 percent of older adults who are treated for depression, improve.

Did You Know?

- One in four people will sometime experience a mental health problem.
- Mental health can be affected by:
 - nutrition
 - alcohol
 - exercise
 - stress
 - illness
 - prescriptions
 - over-the-counter medications
- Older adults account for 25 percent of all suicides. Older men are more likely to commit suicide than older women.
- About 20 percent of people over age 60 have an alcohol problem.
- Only 15 percent of older adults have dementia, or forgetfulness and loss of orientation.

If You or Someone You Know Needs Help, Please Call:

National Mental Health Association (NMHA),
1-800-969-NMHA;

National Association for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) Helpline,
1-800-950-6264

The Center for Mental Health Services Information Line,
1-800-780-CMHS; or Nebraska Mental Health,
(402) 479-5126

Nebraska Mental Health Consumer Help Line,
1-800-836-7660

Nebraska State Department of Aging, **(402) 471-4617;**

or your local mental health office or community services.

Severe and Persistent Mental Illness

A small number of older adults have “severe persistent mental illness” or SPMI. People with a major mental illness are usually diagnosed as a young adult. They may have had many years of mental health treatment and many hospitalizations. Older adults with SPMI often have poor physical health. Many have difficulties accessing regular medical care and managing medications. Most people with SPMI live in the community and may benefit with help to find adequate housing and help with daily living tasks. Some receive assistance or support from families, mental health support programs, group homes, or other mental health services. Others are ostracized from their families and communities and may feel like outcasts because of their illness and often noticeable behavior differences.

Warning Signs

Some common warning signs for many of the more than 200 mental disorders include:

- confused thinking
- prolonged depression
- irritability
- feelings of extreme highs and lows

- excessive fears and anxieties
- social withdrawal
- major changes in eating and sleeping
- strong feelings of anger
- delusions or hallucinations
- growing inability to cope with daily life
- self-neglect or abuse
- suicidal thoughts
- denial of obvious problems
- numerous unexplained physical ailments
- alcohol, medication, or gambling abuse

References

- A Mental Health Guide for Older Kansans and Their Families, 2000.
- Nebraska Mental Health, Substance Abuse and Gambling Services, 2000.
- Panhandle Mental Health Services, Scottsbluff, Neb., 2002.
- Panhandle Community Services, Scottsbluff, Neb., 2002.

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